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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



An ode to Mr. Spock

When I was a kid, Mr. Spock in the television show “Star Trek” became a biracial role model for me. When watching reruns of the original episodes, I immediately related to this half-Vulcan, half-human character. Mr. Spock, played by Leonard Nimoy, was neither Asian nor white but something in-between with pointy ears. Plus he was incredibly smart and could instantly connect with people with a mind meld or disable them with a single Vulcan nerve pinch. As a youth in the 1970s, it was difficult to find role models of mixed-race people. Most television portrayals were mixed-up, sad, even suicidal, people in the archetype of the “tragic mulatto.” Spock was the one character who openly dealt with his turmoil while maintaining both of his cultures — Vulcan and human — in a way that was strong and inspiring. Through the years, I’ve tried different names for my identity: Eurasian, Amerasian, biracial, multi-racial, and mixed-race. I often revert back to explaining myself by saying I’m half-Taiwanese. The sense of being half of something ties many mixed-race people together.

When Leonard Nimoy passed away on February 27, 2015 at the age of 83, it affected millions of “Star Trek” fans, but also multiracial people around the world. I wasn’t the only one who looked up to the character of Spock and his cultural/racial struggles. For many, Mr. Nimoy’s portrayal of Spock was a shining beacon of hope during their youth. On Facebook group pages, fans of all ages wrote eulogies about how Mr. Nimoy’s poignant and heroic characterization of Spock helped them during childhood. Perhaps the greatest example of this outpouring of praise and sadness came from a reprint of a letter to *FaVe* magazine that a biracial African-American girl wrote in 1968. She was being “persecuted” by both black and white students because she didn’t “look like them” and concluded, “I guess I’ll never have any friends.” Leonard Nimoy was so moved by this letter that he wrote a long reply that read like a gentle and compassionate treatise on not only the complexities

of dual cultures but understanding the prejudices of others against mixed-race people. National Public Radio’s “Codeswitch” reprinted these letters upon Mr. Nimoy’s death; they can be read online at <www.mystarttrekscrapbook.blogspot.com>.

“It takes a great deal of courage to turn your back on popularity and to go out on your own,” Mr. Nimoy wrote. “... Now there’s a little voice inside each of us that tells us when we’re not being true to ourselves. We should listen to this voice.” Much of his advice used his characterization of Mr. Spock as an example that can be applied to mixed-race kids today. “Spock learned he could save himself from letting prejudice get him down,” he wrote. “He could do this by really understanding himself and knowing his own value as a person.”

I wish I had read this letter when I was a kid being treated as white but feeling Asian. I certainly think it would have helped my brother who was bullied by classmates because he looked foreign to them. My brother and I bonded over watching “Star Trek.” We still bond together watching sci-fi television shows.

The part that especially moved me in Mr. Nimoy’s letter to the young biracial girl was how he described Spock making a decision to “replace the idea of wanting to be liked with the idea of becoming accomplished.” As someone who has always felt like an outsider without a single community, this has been my lifelong mantra.

I once came very close to telling Mr. Nimoy in person how much his portrayal of Spock impacted my youth. In 2006, I was given an award and he was a speaker at the ceremony. After his talk, I was close to the front of the concert hall and tried to catch up to him as he was leaving. I wanted to thank him for creating a character that felt like a friend to me and other biracial people throughout the troubled times of growing up. And I was so close — almost close enough to touch him on the shoulder — when the crowd closed in around him. Everyone loved him and they too wanted to say thanks as he swept out the door. So I didn’t get my chance. Until now.

Thank you, Mr. Nimoy. I have been, and always shall be, your friend.

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